

THE URGENCY OF ASSERTIVENESS IN A GLOBAL WORLD

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Abstract

This paper is a plea for learning and practicing assertive behavior in all areas of social life. First of all, it aims to clarify the notion of assertiveness and to delimit the assertive behavior from the aggressive and passive one. One argues for the need to use assertive behavior on a large scale, highlighting the benefits it brings to the individual and society. Practicing assertiveness helps individuals to understand themselves more easily, to understand others better, to resolve conflicts more quickly, and to eliminate the negative stress that comes with it. Being a form of communication, which is direct, open, respectful and honest, assertiveness inhibits defense mechanisms and distortions, being an effective way to communicate and resolve interindividual and social differences. The paper starts from the hypothesis that in the former communist societies the social-civic dialogue is still precarious and insufficient and therefore, the need to learn and practice assertiveness becomes more pressing. Democratic ‘construction’ can only be achieved with socially-politically competent citizens (elites and masses alike), as assertiveness occupies a central place among socio-political competences. This paper also makes a concise portrait of the assertive person. Finally, the main ways to achieve an assertive management and its effects on organizational efficiency are explored.

Keywords: *assertiveness, social competence, communication efficiency, democracy, transactional analysis.*

Introduction: Democracy and assertiveness in a global world

In a synthetic sense, assertiveness is self-assertion achieved by arguing for personal ideas, feelings, rights while respecting other persons’ ideas, feelings, rights in a direct, honest and appropriate way. This implies the need for its widespread manifestation in those societies that are democratic or wish to become democratic. In former communist societies, the need to learn and practice assertiveness, to express one’s ideas and exercise

one's rights is self-evident as we should consider that they are still deficient in terms of social communication in general and civic dialogue in particular. The democratic 'construction' can only be achieved together with socially and politically competent citizens (the elite and the masses alike). Assertiveness occupies a central place in socio-political competences.

Moreover, after two years characterized by the pandemic, widespread panic and, at the same time, the restriction of the citizens' rights and freedoms around the world, we see an imposed or voluntary setback of social interaction and political-civic communication even in the consolidated democracies of the world. Due to the fact that democratic, moral, capitalist principles were compromised by certain governments when trying to deal with the complex health crisis facing the global world, the citizens' confidence in the governmental elite suffered a significant decline, as they started questioning their government's good intentions and political abilities. The newly created global socio-political context has caused more and more authorized voices to worriedly point to the decline of democracy around the world. The report 'The State of Democracy in the World in 2021' (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance: IDEA International) analyzing 165 countries in 2020 and 2021 and examining these countries' political and social situation in the last 6 years, concludes that democracy has deteriorated throughout the world. For the first time, the United States were added to the annual list of countries that registered a democratic decline, noting that the decline began in 2019. More than two-thirds of the world's population live in backsliding democracies or autocratic regimes, a trend accentuated by the coronavirus pandemic, according to the annual report released by IDEA International.

Correcting this state of affairs, reinventing and revitalizing the democratic project requires greater involvement, active, competent and responsible participation of citizens in defining and solving the problems of the global world. Participation in turn implies a high level of social and political competence, among which communication skills and assertiveness play an important role. We could say that the reactivation of assertive behaviors, the awakening of the social and political competences of the citizens is becoming an emergency in today's world.

Paper content

Assertiveness: major social competence

To succeed in life, one needs both professional and social skills. Professional skills help one technically perform at the expected level in one's profession. However, as exercising most professions involves social interaction, achieving a high level of professional performance also requires possessing the right social skills. In other words, one's social skills are badly needed not only in our professional and family life, but also in the community, in all areas that involve human interactions. According to S. Moscovici, social skills rank first in everyday behavior and are facilitators of professional and social performance, strongly correlated with maintaining the health of the individual.¹

The 'father of social competence', the psychologist M. Argyle, imposed the term social skills in 1983, defining it as 'a behavioral pattern that offers the society individuals capable of producing certain desired effects on other individuals' (Viorel Robu, 2011, p. 15). These effects may be related to personal motivations or goals assigned to the other, such as the development of learning, recovery or work skills. According to M. Argyle, social skills can be assessed objectively and developed through training; the main social competences that human beings have to varying degrees are: assertiveness, gratification and support, nonverbal communication, verbal communication, empathy, cooperation and attention to others, knowledge and problem solving, and self-presentation.

Social skills refer to people's relationship skills (B. Bernard, 1995). Being socially competent means 'being sensitive, possessing especially the ability to get positive responses from the others; flexibility, including the ability to adapt to both primary and dominant cultures (cross-cultural competence); empathy, communication skills and a sense of humor' (apud Constantinescu, 2004, in Viorel Robu, 2011).

Daniel Goleman (2001) links social competence to emotional intelligence. In order to manifest interpersonal power, the individual must have self-control and the ability to overcome anxiety and stress. The art of relating involves - to a large extent - the development of the ability to manage both one's own emotions and those of others. Connecting to the demands of others requires mastering one's own emotions, a minimum of inner calm and patience: forgetting about your own problems and listening to the

¹ Chelcea S, *Un secol de cercetări psihosociologice*, Polirom Publishing House, Iași, 2002.

problems of the person next to you. As a result, the social competence is a dimension of the emotional intelligence. Goleman believes that the active ingredients inherent in this form of intelligence are: self-confidence, self-control, motivation, empathy, establishing and directing interpersonal relationships.² In conclusion, in Goleman's view, assertiveness is a fundamental component of social competence.

Assertiveness -premise of efficient communication

Assertiveness theory was outlined in the late 1950s and early 1960s in the work of psychologist A. Salter and was composed of key concepts in humanitarian psychology and transactional analysis. According to Lange and Jacobowski (1976), assertiveness means 'upholding one's own rights and expressing one's own thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in a direct, honest, and appropriate manner without violating the rights of the other' (Constantinescu, 1998).

R. Alberti and M. Emmons argue that assertiveness is an instrument with which you can achieve equality in the interpersonal relationships you establish with those around you (I. Moraru, 2012, p. 46). According to J. Cotraux, assertive behavior through which someone asserts himself is 'that type of behavior that allows a person to act as best as possible in one's own interest, to defend one's point of view without exaggerated anxiety, to express one's feelings sincerely and to use one's own rights without denying the other's'³. Lawrence (1997) extends the concept of assertiveness to 'the learning ability to adapt behavior to interpersonal situation on demands so that positive consequences are best and negative ones- minimum.'

In the same context, M. Rocco states that 'assertiveness aims to make the individual able to express his personality, continuing to be socially accepted without fear of arousing hostility in the environment (...).' It also 'means: to assert your rights, make your legitimacy admitted; to make clear and constructive assessments (...); to express your opinion without restraint (...) in the face of hostile interlocutors'⁴.

Assertiveness expressed through the assertion 'I' helps to maintain one's position and point of view without attacking the other person (H. Cornelius and S. Faire, 1996, pp. 93-104). The assertion 'I' implies clarification and is the beginning of the conversation,

² Viorel Robu, *Competențe sociale și personalitate*, Lumen, 2011, Iasi, p. 24.

³ J. Cotraux apud. Dafinoiu I., Vargha J.-L., *Psihoterapii scurte: strategii, metode, tehnici*, Polirom Publishing House, Iași, 2005, p. 52.

⁴ M. Roco, *Creativitate și inteligență emoțională*, Polirom Publishing House, Iași, 2001, pp. 166 and 167.

not a conclusion. It is an opener of communication that allows the expression of feelings about an event, without blaming and without asking the other person to change. The choice for assertiveness is 'not always easy. It often requires a conscious choice, a degree of flexibility and ability, some courage and confidence in the communication process'⁵.

Practicing assertiveness helps individuals to understand themselves more easily, to understand others better, to resolve conflicts more quickly, and to eliminate the negative stress that comes with it. Being a form of communication, which is direct, open, respectful and honest, assertiveness inhibits defense mechanisms and distortions, being an effective way to communicate and resolve interindividual and social differences. The assertive option - the premise and expression of democratic behavior - streamlines social dialogue and facilitates the exercise of free will in everyday life.

In the specialized literature, the correlation of assertiveness with the efficiency of communication is increasingly common. In A. Solter's analysis, assertive behavior is examined as an optimal and most constructive means of interpersonal interaction, being in opposition to the most widespread destructive methods: manipulation and aggression. J. Cl. Abric, in turn, links the efficiency of communication with the ability of the interlocutor to listen and express himself. 'For communication to be effective and qualitative, it is necessary to listen; to observe; to analyze; to control; to express yourself'⁶.

In Ad. Baban's opinion, efficient and assertive communication requires adherence to the following principles: 'say NO when a personal right or value is violated; motivate your statement without justifying yourself – don't apologize; express your personal opinions specifically, clearly - avoid general wording; accept and compliment; be direct; ask for feedback - to prevent misinterpretation; change the conversation or avoid the person when you cannot communicate assertively; refer to the inappropriate behavior of a person with a positive remark; focus on behavior and not on the person when you want to make a remark; highlight the negative consequences of his behavior on you, specify the desired behavior, offer alternatives to the behavior you want to change; analyze the costs and benefits of behavior'⁷.

⁵ Helena Cornelius, Shohana Faire, *Știința rezolvării conflictelor, Știința și Tehnica*, 1996, p. 93.

⁶ Abric J.C., *Psihologia comunicării: teorii și metode*, Polirom Publishing House, Iași, 2002, p.193.

⁷ Ad.Baban, *Consiliere educațională. Ghid metodologic pentru orele de dirigenție și consiliere*, Ardealul Publishing House, Iași, 2000, p. 155, apud. Elena Birsan, *Paradigma comunicării asertive în formarea profesională a studenților*, Chisinau, p. 34.

Assertive behaviors from the perspective of transactional analysis

In 'The Assertive Woman', Stanlee Phelps and Nancy Austin (2002) analyze, in addition to assertive behavior, three other patterns of behavior, in the form of life stereotypes and behavioral stereotypes, respectively, *i.e.* passive, aggressive and passive-aggressive (indirectly aggressive) behaviors. From this analysis one could observe that assertiveness opposes both aggression and passivity. Assertiveness means neither giving up nor a lack of combativeness.

Next, I will try to describe the three types of behavior (aggressive-passive-assertive) from the perspective of the basic principles of transactional analysis⁸, namely:

a. People are OK! Every human being has value and dignity as a person. All people are equal.

b. Every human being has the ability to think, except in the case of major brain disorders. In conclusion, man has the responsibility to decide what he wants from life and to live with the consequences of his decisions.

c. Human beings decide their own destiny. Throughout their lives, they can change their decisions. Although most of their ways of interacting with the world have been formed since childhood, they can rethink and change them throughout their lives.

We aim to establish which of these behavioral types mentioned above subscribe to these principles. We will try to find out the possible correspondences between the three states of the Ego (Adult-Parent-Child) and these types of behavior.

Eric Berne, the initiator of Transactional Analysis, describes human personality and interpersonal relationships from the perspective of the three states of the ego: the Child Ego State, the Parent Ego State, and the Adult Ego State. An ego state refers to a set of behaviors, thoughts and reasoning, emotions and feelings, associated and activated by a life situation. In each of us, these conditions exist from a very early age to an advanced age.

In the 'Parent' state, the person analyzes and explains things in the same way as one of his parents or educators did. Due to the 'Parent' state, many of the reactions have become automated, which saves time and energy. The parent's behavior often falls under the formula 'this is how it should be ...', 'I know how it should be ...', which, in certain

⁸ Transactional Analysis is an explanatory theory of personality and a therapeutic system dedicated to personal development and change.

circumstances, can favor the appearance of aggressive behavior on the part of some interlocutors (those who are of the 'Parent' type).

Being in the 'Child' state, the person reacts like a small child. The child does not always analyze the consequences of his actions on himself and others. The child's behavior is in the formula I want ...'.

The 'Adult' state: the independent person assesses the situation objectively, analyzes the information, expresses his opinion, formulates the problem and can present his decision. The adult is aware of his own goals, emotions and needs and is able to coordinate these elements in his own activity. The action formula typical for the 'Adult' state is 'I choose ...', 'I want.'

The aggressive behaviour. The aggressive individual is the arrogant, critical, egocentric, conflictual. He adopts the position of superiority, being accustomed to systematically underrate and devalue his interlocutors. He is competitive, ambitious, even stubborn, he does not accept to lose. He insists on his rights and is ready to use force to obtain them. He is critical of everyone and pretentious, so he is unpleasant. It is the typical behavior of the autocratic manager, not permissive with employees and subordinates who, in order to impose respect, cultivate fear in the organization. Aggressive behavior corresponds to the attitude 'I'm OK, you're not OK!' and is associated with the states of a revolted child or a critical (normative) parent. Those who relate to the aggressive usually respond with the same behavior or avoid it. Nonverbal aspects of aggressive behavior are: very loud voice and fast speech pace; cold, expressionless eye contact that fixes the interlocutor; stiff, tense posture, tense body, legs apart, asymmetrical position; hands clasped or on the hips, abrupt, wide or directive gestures; distance less than 0.5 m; very short latency, frequent interruptions.

On the other hand, **passive behavior** is associated with the 'I'm not OK - You're OK!' attitude. It is the attitude of the submissive, the self-deprecating who (consciously or not) are inferior in relation to others. They feel overshadowed by others, they have no initiative, they are addicted, compliant, obedient. They are good performers, if given directions. As a rule, the passive person is dominated by all kinds of fears: of being hurt or hurting oneself, of failure, of being rejected, of conflict, of being in trouble, and so on. The passive individual is accustomed to give up easily or to avoid any confrontation with others, adapts to the demands of others, does not defend his own rights and lets himself

be dominated. The others often try to take advantage of his weaknesses: they make unjustified or exaggerated requests, or they reject even his few and timid requests. In most cases, the adapted child is the one who favors this position.

All these characteristics of the passive individual are transparent and in his nonverbal manifestations: looking down or in vain; standing rigid, defensive, symmetrical or bent in front of the interlocutor; restless hands, hesitant movements, gestures oriented towards one's own body; distance greater than 1m; long pauses between the moment the interlocutor finished what he had to say and the answer; very low volume, monotonous voice, low speech pace.

Passive-aggressive behavior: 'I'm not OK – you're not OK!' Cottraux considered it typical a behavior for a person who denies his own rights, without taking responsibility for it. On the contrary, this type of individual blames the others, being convinced that the others are to blame for his obedience. The person characterized by this type of behavior is accustomed to: passively oppose performing routine social and professional tasks; complain about not being understood and appreciated by others; be gloomy and quarrelsome; criticize and despise authority without reason; express envy and resentment towards the obviously more prosperous; express exaggerated and persistent accusations of personal misfortune; alternate between hostile defiance and penance. This individual is the Victim par excellence, crying for pity, being susceptible, vulnerable, non-communicative. Moreover, this type of person has a stable low self-esteem, is pessimistic, preaches misfortune and disaster.

Assertive behavior: 'I'm OK – you're OK!' In transactional analysis, this behaviour is defined as 'the attitude of the winners', that of the champions. This person defends his rights (in a non-aggressive way), without violating the rights of the others. Assertive behavior involves a parallel Adult-Adult transaction. The assertive person behaves like an adult and at the same time perceives his interlocutor also as an adult. In addition to this, this type of individual remains in this state of Adulthood even if his interlocutor leaves it. Assertiveness is the existential position described by self-confidence and trust in others, cooperation, team spirit, equal negotiation, tolerance and fair play. The assertive person can control his own behavior, maintain verticality and balance, while respecting the wishes and rights of others. Nonverbal characteristics of assertive behavior are: direct eye contact, without fixing the interlocutor; calm, quiet but firm, well-

modulated voice; relaxed body position; straight back posture; keeping an appropriate distance during conversation, of approximately 0.5-1m; answering without hesitation after the interlocutor spoke.

The portrait of the assertive person

If we were to draw a portrait of an assertive person, we could say the following about him⁹:

- He knows what respect means. Everyone has the right to respect for the simple fact that he is human. The Declaration of Independence of the United States (1776) states that the true value of a man is a grace from God and not what he does by himself and that all men are endowed by God with an innate value. As well as this, the assertive individual abides by Kant's categorical imperative: 'Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end.' this type of person applies the principle of respect both in relation to himself and to all that is beyond himself: people, concepts, ideas, things, actions, etc. He rejects violence and ill-treatment and is concerned with preserving not only personal dignity, but also that of the others.

- He honestly connects with the others. He builds good relationships with the others, realizing that this construction cannot be based on falsehood and hypocrisy. To be honest, then, is to declare one's intentions and act accordingly, that is, to present oneself to the world as one is. In short, it means not deceiving oneself or the others. And it is at this point that sincerity seems to be the same as authenticity. The assertive person is sincere with those around him without hurting them, he shows integrity and inspires confidence.

- He knows himself; he accepts and appreciates himself. He trusts himself without sharing a sense of self-sufficiency or superiority. This type of individual shares both the feeling of greatness and the fragility of the human being, because, in fact, *'man is only a reed, the most fragile in nature: but he is a thinking reed. There is no need for the whole universe to rage against him in order to crush him. Some steam, a drop of water might be enough to kill him. But even if the whole universe were to crush him, man would still be nobler than the one who kills him ...'* (Blaise Pascal 'Thoughts' in *Selected Writings*,

⁹ <https://nospensees.fr/7-caracteristiques-personnes-assertives/>.

translated into Romanian, Științifică Publishing House, Bucharest, 1967). Assertive people define themselves as rational human beings, while acknowledging their imperfection and fragility. They are aware of their qualities and opportunities as well as their vulnerabilities and disadvantages. From this feeling of imperfection emanates their desire to grow, to improve their disadvantages, to surpass themselves.

- He demonstrates emotional stability and self-control. Assertive people manage to put in place the mechanisms necessary for their emotional regulation, their dominant attitude being serenity. Of course, an assertive person is also experiencing feelings of anger, anguish, pain, but he understands that he must not let go of these negative emotions with such a high energy load. He applies these principles to others as well: he knows how to listen to and understand their feelings, and he tries to calm them down. He does not seek to manipulate his interlocutor by looking for weaknesses and mistakes.

- He cultivates his communication skills. He realizes that, often, difficulties in relationships, conflicts derive from deficiencies in communication: lack of empathic listening, sincerity, a real desire to reach an agreement, clarity of the message, ability to assert oneself, etc. Assertive people are concerned and have - to a large extent - the ability to listen actively, comprehensively, to express themselves simply, clearly and sincerely. They are willing - whenever necessary - to invest in the development of communication skills.

- He knows how to set boundaries. He understood that one could not always respond to the expectations and desires of the others by completely forgetting oneself. Moreover, the assertive person not only understood that one should not be blamed for this, but also that there are certain limits to everything and that there are situations that require clear boundaries. The assertive person can say 'NO', he can set limits without trying to feel guilty.

- He is emotionally independent. Manifestation of indifference or rejection by others is tolerated. Assertive people seek to be consistent with their own values, beliefs, needs, do not act only to gain the approval of others, do not work according to the herd principle. Like any human being, the assertive person prefers to be in agreement with others, enjoys their approval, confirmation. At the same time, this type of individual prefers to lose this approval if the price is to give up one's own beliefs, if one is asked to act against one's own conscience.

It is important to mention that all these features are dynamic, they are never complete, they do not manifest the same at any time or in any field, they are always perfectible. The following characteristics could complete the portrait of the assertive person¹⁰: high level of self-confidence; taking responsibility for the problem; motivation to achieve one's goals correctly; interest in how others feel and think; active listening, fairness; encouraging feedback.

Conclusions: The individual and social benefits of assertiveness

Being an expression of self-respect and respect for the others, sincerity and openness to the others, self-control and positive self-esteem, assertive behavior tends to inhibit anxiety and reduce depression. A person could not be both assertive and anxious at the same time, because assertiveness prevented anxiety (J. Wolpe, 1958).

Assertiveness understood as an aspiration to assert oneself, to value one's self, inhibits feelings of inferiority and insecurity. It is the path towards the individual's self-realization in personal, professional and social life. Besides being a means of gaining respect, self-realization also involves the exercise of self-knowledge, acceptance and self-esteem, sincere connection with the others, emotional independence, limitation and delimitation of certain behaviors and last but not least, the development of communication skills. In a word, it is assertiveness! That is why assertiveness should not only remain a behavioral therapy (used by psychologists or psychiatrists in the treatment of neurosis or other mental illnesses), but it should be introduced and used in schools, universities, organizations, corporations, etc.

Moreover, for a democratic society to evolve, to consolidate, it needs assertive people, who are neither aggressive nor obedient. Democracy needs people who are active subjects in socio-political life, who respect, apply and militate for human rights, who are socially and politically (civically) competent. One should not forget that when it comes to socio-political competences, a central place is occupied by assertiveness.

Taking into account the warnings of IDEA International regarding the decline of democracy around the world, the need to learn and practice assertiveness at all levels of society is ever more pressing. Revitalizing the democratic project requires greater

¹⁰ M. Constantinescu, *Competența socială și competența profesională*. Economică Publishing House, Bucharest, 2004, p. 30.

competent and responsible involvement of citizens everywhere in defining and solving the problems of the global world. This involvement in turn requires learning, practicing, reactivating assertive behaviors. History shows us that the sleep of assertiveness can produce dictatorships!

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